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**NOTES FOR SPEECH  
TO DINNER OF ALUMNI OF  
CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL  
4<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2000  
TORONTO**

**Tonight we meet as members of the family - a family that is spread over at least four continents and some of the islands lying between or alongside those continents. And we meet to celebrate Central High School that created that family and set our feet on the road to what we have become and who we are.**

**To celebrate is to look back with a sense of gratitude and , in our case even with wonder - wonder at the vision , the guts and the audacity of the people who created the institution that so mightily nurtured us. And so this week- end we get together to share the spunk, the energy, the fun and the confidence of challenges met and challenges licked that constitutes the spirit of Central High.**

Central made us a family because it began as a family. J C.. Luck, the founder, was rich in children but poor in money.. He had searched for gold in the interior, as you heard, but although Luck was his name he luck was not his fate for he found none. He had built a boat and turned it into a shop to sell goods to people on the banks of the Demerara. The boat kept afloat but JC's finances did not. But for J.C. the bigger the set-back the stronger the determination. He started a school to teach his own and other people's children - in a small cottage in Smythe Street and the rent was sometimes paid from a scholarship that Eaton, his eldest son had. It was a decision of destiny.

Thus from the most fragile and vulnerable of beginnings there rose up that immense and renowned school which is our alma mater.

What no one could foresee at the time was that this mingy creation was going to become a great leap forward in Guyana's educational history. The year was 1929 - the bleak kick-off of bleaker days to come in the form of the Great Depression which left millions in Europe, the Americas and

throughout the colonial empires without work, without self-esteem, without hope. It took many people in Guyana to the very brink of survival but it brought out a wonderful quality among Guyanese and West Indians. Those who had little shared it with those who had less and that spirit of sharing scarce resources wove itself into the grain of Central High-the school that I first took to my heart in 1944.

But there is a paradox to the early years of Central. As the Depression deepened and many institutions in Guyana became almost paralysed, the school was moving in the opposite direction -it grew in numbers and in reputation. In short, it was the worst of times for the country and it was the best of times for the school. It went from 9 students - J.C's children -in 1929 to something like 300 in 1939. Obviously whatever else atrophied with the depression the appetite for secondary education was alive and well. That is a distinctly Caribbean phenomenon- the belief that where there is education there is hope— hope of change in one's own life, hope of change in the society and where these do not happen hope of emigration to other societies.



Central High became by the beginning of the 1940's became an expression of the temper of the times. In the late 1930's throughout the British Caribbean, working people, often backed by intellectuals, took to venting their anger against the colonial system frequently in strikes and sometimes in violent riots. Guyanese, like other West Indians were looking for a "New Deal" – no longer content to live in airless and static societies, veritable deserts of opportunity, with cramped horizons and stunting social prejudices, with poverty and sickness widespread– all assaults on human dignity.

They wanted ENABLING INSTITUTIONS to equip them and their children with the tools to make a better living for themselves, yes but also to open the doors to further opportunity and a greater freedom of <sup>upward</sup> movement within their societies. Central High began to be seen as one of those enabling institutions – a place where young people of the working class or the lower middle class could be imbued with the knowledge and skills to pass the overseas examinations. Remember, in those days to be armed with a Senior Cambridge or London School certificate made a young man

or woman stand tall and walk strong. Those certificates were sought after like 24 carat gold nuggets.. The school motto says “I think therefore I am” and for many it meant “I am certificated therefore I am”.

Central was a classic enabling institution because its fees were so manageable. When I joined the school in 1944 I paid \$12.64 per term. When I paid my last term's fees in 1951 they were still \$12.64 - the same amount that students were paying in 1939. There are many people of talent and ability, some here tonight, for whom those modest fees made possible the foundation of a satisfying career. There was tremendous social wisdom in this modest payments. J.C. Luck took the pulse of the time correctly and positioned his school to move in step with the changes that were on their way. If a visionary is someone who unerringly diagnoses the changes that are in the wind and sets his sails to ride ahead of them, then J.C. was a visionary.

The Second World banished the Depression. Guyana had to feed itself and the “Grow More Food Campaign” stimulated and quickened the activities of the farmers, Black and



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Indian. By 1942 there was the American presence and with it the Yankee dollar and Yankee jobs for Guyanese. The return of hope brought with it a re-invigorated appetite for secondary education and many eyes turned to Central High, now a senior, distinctive star among the constellation of secondary schools that were appearing to cater for the new demand. <sup>a</sup> Every week-day increasing train-loads of students from the villages on the East and West coasts of Demerara and even further afield arrived in Georgetown in pursuit of that holy grail of educational achievement— the Senior School Certificate.

*a Sheddin' their light on  
the educational scene.*

A vigorous and vibrant multi-culturalism became the hallmark of Central High. When I entered the school in October 1944 I spoke a smattering of Creolese. When I left in 1951 I was completely bi-lingual. Those boys and girls from the rural villages and estates had taken me in hand and done their job splendidly. I have remained ever since then an enthusiastic student of Creolese..

Being a student at Central High in the 1940's was not just a priming to face the dragon of overseas exams. It was

something far more enlightening and fundamental: an immersion in self-help. That was the way the Smythe street school was built in 1937. It was an extraordinary feat of unpaid workforce of five. J.C. Luck, two of his older sons and Brently Adams and occasionally Ochro Alleyne.....they put up that whole structure without the use of a single professional carpenter. J.C., whose skills multiplied with the challenges he faced, proved to be a resourceful and skilled carpenter. - and something of an architect.

Adams sawed the tough mora timber for the desks and sweated with righteous purpose. They silenced all those doom sayers who said it could not be done. In fact it was unwise to tell J.C. that something could not be done for then, you could bet your bottom dollar that he would do it. The man was a unique combination of head and hand and heart.

It could be said of Central in the 1940's that "never was so much achieved by so many with so few resources" In the 1940's Central possessed puny material resources - no language labs, almost no teaching aids-and up to 1948 among its teachers there was not a single university degree until J.C.



and Addie achieved their Bachelor of Arts, at the third attempt. Some of the staff had what was called a “matriculation” which meant that they could be admitted to a British University. Others had something curiously known as the “inter-B.A.” which meant that they were qualified to take the exams for a degree. One teacher who rejoiced in this qualification used to put behind his signature “B.A. Inter”

But what we lacked in trained human and material resources we made up for in mutual assistance and inspired cooperation. A wise man recently said “Next to the energy of the sun there is no greater renewable resource than human cooperation” We did not know those words in the 1940's but we certainly lived the truth they express.

For instance, if one of our class-mates discovered a book which made more sense of a particular subject or presented the material more attractively— and remember, most of the text-books of the time were distinctly bleak, the book would be shared with every body in the class. Different students would undertake to copy our different sections of the volume and then we would put it together to draw from it as required.



**In those days there was a correspondence college in Britain called Wolsey Hall. Its target audience was people who were taking the English exams. Its function was to show them how to answer exam questions in the way the examiners wanted. So they took questions from recent exam papers and provided model answers. Those courses were a blessing but they did not come cheap. So whoever got hold of one or more such courses lent them out to be copied. Then copies were made of copies till practically everyone in the class gained possession of the precious material.**

**A few of us had a parents or relatives or a mentors who were au fait with one or more of the exam subjects. Sure enough we would use all our persuasive powers to get them to help our class mates and a number of sessions would ensue. One student whose mentor was the then Anglican Bishop of Guyana and a renowned teacher in a previous incarnation, got the Bishop to coach his class in precis writing and history**

**All of this is to say that we used whatever was available. In fact that was the greatest lesson that Central taught us: how**

to discern in the world around us a possibility; how to shape that possibility into an opportunity by dexterous massage; and how to milk that opportunity <sup>to nurture</sup> ~~for~~ an achievement. We were unabashed in asking for help and we made sure that help was given not to the few but to the many. All of this is not to say that we uncompetitive. But what we practised was competitive cooperation. So in a very real sense we were marrying two putatively opposing approaches to living and learning - the competitive and the cooperative. In a school of slender resources in a poor, underdeveloped colony of the British Empire we were, without realising it, creating the best of all possible worlds.

Our teaching staff was as mixed a bag of personalities as you could get. JC usually taught the School Certificate classes English and a superb teacher he was. But we enjoyed him most when he digressed <sup>①</sup> from his subject to give us his views on life and how to live it. He once turned to the males in a class and instructed them on how to make an impression on the girl of their dreams. "If she is intelligent, tell her that she is pretty; and if she is pretty tell her she is intelligent." ②

① He digressed really to give us ideas for the essays we would write in the exams.



JC was a great booster of our morale. In those days public exams were terrifying things. The exam rooms felt like law-courts in which we were being tried and were bound to be sentenced. Never did a flicker of a smile cross the wasteland of the invigilators' faces..They treated us like trespassers in the land of learning whom the English examiners would soon drive out. But we gave ourselves a shot in the arm by remembering JC's words, his air of total reassurance and his rogue's smile. That put us in fine fettle to face the rigours of those trials by ordeal.

### **TELL THE STORY OF SCANTLEBURY WHO WENT DUMB TWO DAYS BEFORE THE EXAM**

The man who taught my generation Geography was a model of physical fitness and a dandy dresser but his hold on geographical details was sometimes a bit shaky. That old bible of geography was our text book and we had to study Canada for the Junior Cambridge exams. One day we read in the text the following sentence: " In the arctic region of Canada the Eskimos hunt caribou or fish" "Sir what is Caribou" a voice asked . Back came the reply form this

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**teacher “ Don’t you see the book explains it– it is fish.” Some trusting souls actually informed the English examiners that caribou were fish which drove an amused examiner to write JC and ask him to disabuse his students of that misconception.**

**Duke Munroe was the teacher I most remember. Duke by name, he was a duke by mature, tall, stately of bearing and of speech, immaculate in dress and in behaviour, he was one of nature’s true aristocrats , a man with a distinct sense of equality with all living beings.**

**A fine Latin scholar and an excellent teacher of English literature he stunned us one day by writing on the blackboard the Latin word “TESTICULI” We sniggered and he rebuked us.”Keep your minds out of the gutter” he said “ what we are doing here is the origin of words not the use of the objects they refer to”. He pointed out that testiculus is derived from the word testis which means witness. When the early Romans swore an oath they held their testicles as witnesses to their sincerity. So those parts of the male anatomy came to be called “little witness” - hence**



the word testiculus. I was both amused and fascinated by this and that began for me a life-long interest in the origin of words

**TELL THE STORY OF THE FLOATING CONDOM IN MR. HOPE'S HISTORY CLASS.**

**SAY THIS: THE FLOATING CONDOM WAS A WORDLESS STATEMENT THAT OUR BLEAK HISTORY TEXTBOOKS WERE PROPHYLACTICS AGAINST LEARNING.** *The text-books were condemned by Condom*

**TELL THE STORY OF CAPTAIN NOBBS' RESPONSE TO MY BEING ANNOUNCED AS ONE OF TWO OPEN SCHOLARS OF UWI IN 1951.**

*I was teaching a class about euphemisms*  
**LAST STORY: THE EUPHEMISTIC EXCUSE:**

**RODERICK CANNOT COME TO SCHOOL BECAUSE HE HAS NOT BEEN; I HAVE GIVEN HIM A DOSE OF CASTER OIL TO GO AND WHEN HE HAS GONE HE WILL COME.**